

Bring Them All Home: The Hostage Return Protests and Making of Israeli Foreign Policy in the October 7th War

Abstract



The article presents an analysis of the role of protests aimed at the return of Israeli hostages as a key factor in setting the foreign policy agenda of the State of Israel during the first two years of the October 7th War. By relying on Robert Putnam's 'two-level' approach to foreign policy analysis, the protesters, both as organised groups and regular citizens, are viewed as key actors in the 'second', i.e. domestic level of politics. By demonstrating the importance of protests in setting the agenda for warfare and peace negotiations, as well as their limitations in this regard, the article argues for a continued analytical relevance of popular mobilization within Israel's political system and foreign policy. In particular, the ability of protests to set and maintain the return of the hostages as war goal, yet their inability to effect a ceasefire deal, is placed in the context of Israel's political pluralism and democratic procedures.

Keywords



Israeli hostages, October 7th War, popular mobilization, Israeli foreign policy, domestic and foreign policy.

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Introduction

Following the attacks Hamas militants carried out against Israeli civilian and military targets on the 7th of October 2023, 251 people were taken hostage and transported to the Gaza Strip, approximately half of them being third-country or dual citizens and half holding solely Israeli citizenship (Reuters, 2023). This event was the catalyst for the on-going war between Israel and Hamas, hereafter referred to as the October 7th War.² The next day, Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu announced the declaration of war against Hamas in a televised address. In the following days, the bulk of statements by Netanyahu and top Israeli officials centred on the necessity of militarily defeating Hamas, so it was nine days later, on the 16th of October, that 'maximum effort to solve the hostage issue' became one of the four war goals adopted by the Security Cabinet and circulated within the security establishment (G. Cohen, 2023). Already in November, however, protests that numbered several thousand took place several times across the country, most prominently at 'Hostages Square' (*Kikar HaḤatofim*) in front of the Tel Aviv Museum of Art. From this point onward, mass mobilizations of Israeli citizens aimed at pressuring the government to reach a hostage release deal would become a sporadic, yet constant feature of domestic politics in Israel during the October 7th War. The significance of this is underscored by a basic difficulty it presents the government: signalling the return of all hostages as a priority may work to Hamas' advantage, both as a moderating influence on unrestricted military operations and as an asset in any peace or ceasefire negotiations. Why has the issue been an impossible one to officially side-line from the foreign policy agenda, despite the limitation it places on Israel's capacity to wage war against its enemy?

[2] Alternative names for this conflict include the 'Gaza War', the 'Swords of Iron War' (Hebrew: לורב חוברת המלחמה), the 'Simchat Torah War' (Hebrew: הדרות תחמש תמוז), as well as the 'Battle of Al-Aqsa Flood' (Arabic: (صق أ) ن افوط عكس عم).

The issue of how to incorporate domestic politics within foreign policy analysis is a well-established one (see Alden and Aran, 2017), though it is of particular importance with regards to democratic (or at least, electorally competitive) states. One notable attempt to resolve the relationship between foreign and domestic policy which aimed to go beyond undeniable, yet vague ideas about 'influence' was made by Robert D. Putnam in the form of his 'two-level game' model (Putnam, 1988). Putnam's basic argument, ultimately derived from game theory, is that political decision makers who carry out international negotiations are always engaged in a two-level game; at Level I they negotiate with representatives of other states and/or organisations, whereas at Level II they negotiate with their own constituents, whom they ostensibly represent. In this game, Putnam claims, negotiators pursue 'win-sets' at Level II, i.e. at least minimal majorities necessary among their constituents for agreements achieved at Level I to be accepted or 'ratified'. No agreement may be reached, therefore, without an overlap of expected minimal win-sets between two sides in a negotiation, whether the 'constituents' in question are clearly defined interest groups, domestic organisations or even 'public opinion' as such (Putnam, 1988: 436). In each case, the nature of these Level II actors will necessarily depend on the socio-political context of the polity under analysis.

The temporal scope of the article is the first two years of the war, from October 2023 to October 2025. The aim of this article is to use Putnam's two-level model to illustrate the role of domestic protests in putting forward and maintaining the issue of hostages as a major priority in Israel's foreign policy, both in military operations and periodic negotiations with Hamas. It will be argued that the protests ensured, in Putnam's terms, the return of hostages as an unavoidable win-set for Israeli decision makers at the domestic level. The source of the protests' capacity to raise and keep this issue as part of the minimal win-set will be located in the peculiarities of Israel's political system. As will be shown, the basic patterns of political life and institutions in Israel have made decision makers keenly sensitive to this form of mass mobilization, though, crucially, not at the cost of all other priorities. In order to illustrate this, the article will rely on secondary sources for providing the aforementioned context as well as poll data for demonstrating the continued relevance of the issue for Israeli constituents.

Win-set formation in Israel

In assessing the role of popular mobilization in Israel, related to a broader conception of public opinion, a major contribution has been given by Shamir and Shikaki (2005) in demonstrating how public opinion has come to shape Israeli policy towards the Palestinians, explicitly relying on Putnam's two-level model. They point to Israel's 'national identity' as

the nation state of the Jewish people as a crucial factor in shaping public opinion with regard to solutions proposed for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. While the substance of this article diverges both from a broad notion of public opinion and deals with a contextually different case, it nonetheless acknowledges that political processes, and especially any notions of national identity, are necessary requisites for the analytically coherent formation of domestic constituencies essential to Putnam's two-level approach. To that end, I put forward three major factors, by no means exhaustive yet unavoidable, which enabled the hostages protest movement to assert the issue of hostage return as an indispensable part of the win-set for Israeli war policy: competitive institutions, electoral volatility and long-term securitisation practice.

Competitive institutions

Israel's status as a democracy has been consistently verified by reports of various democratic indices, with Freedom House labelling it as 'free' (Freedom House, 2025), the Economist Democracy Index labelling it as a 'flawed democracy' (EIU, 2024), and the V-Dem Institute as an 'electoral democracy' (Nord et al., 2025), the latter two placing it in the second-most democratic category of their respective classifications. Conversely, scholars have criticised Israel for failing to reach its claimed status as a democracy, with the most recurring criticisms being centred on the political exclusion of Palestinians under *de facto* Israeli control within the Gaza Strip and West Bank/Judea and Samaria (Scheindlin, 2023; Pappé, 2000; Shlaim, 2014). It is not necessary to elaborate on a normative theory of democracy against which to measure Israel at this time, merely to highlight that even with mentioned criticisms in mind, Israel's political system is electoral and highly competitive, having had 37 governments in the 77 years of its existence.

As a formal parliamentary democracy, the distribution of political power in Israel is determined by parliamentary elections. Israel's electoral system has been characterised as 'extreme', due to its pairing of a single national electoral district with proportional representation, leading to a political landscape of high competition, fragmentation and multi-party coalitions as a general rule (Shugart, 2011). The first element that cannot be overlooked, therefore, is that each foreign policy decision will be subjected to periodic review (or 'ratification') at the end of the election cycle.

The need for coalition building in order to form governments is directly related to the formation of win-sets for those actors who eventually do form governments — decision makers know that the 'ratification' of any agreement cannot rely solely on support of their own voters, nor can the formulation of agreements be carried out within a single party and according to its ideological and programmatic orientation. This di-

versification of constituencies, coupled with a constant need to reach consensus within the ruling coalition, contributes to an overall higher sensitivity to pressures of ratification, opening up possibilities for greater influence of domestic actors who are capable of influencing expected election results and particular political party programmes.

Electoral volatility

Directly related, though not identical with the political system itself, is Israel's electoral volatility, that is, the common occurrence of voters switching party preferences from one election cycle to the next. Although instability and increasing political fracturing has been a feature of Israel's party system since the 1990s (E. Cohen, 2024), it is particularly salient to focus on the immediate period preceding the eruption of the October 7th War. Namely, between April of 2019 and November of 2022, Israel has seen five general elections and three governments, including the present Netanyahu government. These facts already point to an electorate which is not merely divided across key cleavages, but where voter preferences and may shift rapidly between elections, while voter turnout remains relatively stable, between 67.5% and 71.5% in the previous five elections (CBS, 2023). Importantly, Hazan (2021) has noted that electoral volatility in Israel should be distinguished from could be called 'ideological volatility', that is, the low levels of loyalty voters seem to display for specific parties does not translate to their propensity to cross ideological lines, so that in effect parties often compete *within* ideological blocs for roughly stable numbers of voters from one election to the next. Nonetheless, even this important caveat does not eliminate the procedural difficulties of forming stable governments in a context of vote shares constantly fluctuating between different parties.

While underscoring a rise in electoral volatility over the last four election cycles, Rahat (2023) has also argued that it has been further exacerbated by a high degree of personalization of politics, best exemplified by Netanyahu himself. As a result of low party trust, leadership style, as well as institutional and media practices of personalization, Rahat has argued that since 2019 political personalization has reached a new peak (72), creating new cleavages centred around specific personalities. I contend that this is an important factor in mass mobilization, as it opened up greater possibilities of coordination between anti-Netanyahu political actors, even when they may otherwise find themselves voting for different parties and different ideological blocs.

Securitising practices

From the moment of its founding, the State of Israel was proclaimed as a *Jewish* state, not only through its founding document but by decades

of the Zionist movement advocating for this very goal. This descriptor of a 'Jewish' state does not merely mean a state in which the majority identify as ethnically Jewish, however, but as Patten (2020) points out, it is difficult to explain a series of decisions by Israeli authorities over the preceding decades without grasping the *normative* dimension of what a 'Jewish' state is. Namely, the notion that the State of Israel has a 'special obligation' towards ethnic Jews that it does not towards others may be traced throughout its legislation and political practice. Just as this conception has been ingrained in specific policies, so has it been a matter of general national historiography (Penslar, 2007), as well as rhetorical politics, notably including the Likud party (Shenhav, 2004). A major point of the idea of a Jewish state has also been that Israel's existence guarantees safety to Jews and, in the background of its formation after the Second World War, will prevent the mass loss of Jewish lives that occurred during the Holocaust (Shain and Bristman, 2002). The continued emphasis these practices put on collective and individual security of Jews were further compounded by Israel's conduct in previous cases of Israeli hostages.

From the 1980s onwards, the issue of kidnapped Israeli soldiers and civilians who could not be retrieved through rescue operations came to the fore, as Israel's enemies had modified their tactics to make rescues exceedingly difficult (Ganor, 2017). As Ganor notes (10), even Prime Minister Netanyahu, initially a vocal opponent of exchanging Palestinian prisoners in Israeli custody for Israeli hostages, came to accept the notorious 'Shalit deal' under immense public pressure, releasing 1 027 Palestinians convicted of terrorism for a single Israeli soldier. Netanyahu's acquiescence came exemplify a growing sense that leaving Israeli hostages to their fate came at such a politically high price that it left no alternatives to politicians than to conduct negotiations, even when they may not be ultimately successful.

Hostage protests as win-set formation

Having established the necessary context of domestic politics in Israel vis-a-vis the political system and the particular issue of hostages taken by enemy forces, an overview of actual practices by protestors came to assert the hostage issue in the case of the October 7th War. The hostage protests that began in November were not the first to occur under the most recent Netanyahu government. After the government revealed its judicial reform plan in January 2023, large-scale protests erupted across Israel. As polling showed, the protests against judicial reform at least coincided with, if not directly causing, a drop in voter support sufficient to leave the coalition without a majority in the case of elections (Haaretz, 2023), but the issue was abruptly suspended with the breakout of the October 7th War.

The initial protests would take place already by November of 2023, with thousands rallying in Tel Aviv to protest perceived government inaction on the hostage issue in the aftermath of the abductions (Aljazeera, 2023). Notably, neither the announcement of the first deal for a partial release of hostages nor their release led to a quelling of the protests, which was shown by further demonstrations in Tel Aviv to mark the 50th day of the crisis (Steinberg, 2023). The largest mobilizations of 2024 took place in September, with organisers citing more than 500 000 citizens protesting them across the country and the largest trade union, the Histadrut, calling for a strike on first of the month (Lehmann et al., 2024). Both large- and small-scale protests continued, but the next major wave would come in August of 2025, with the announcement of an Israeli Defence Forces ground offensive in Gaza City. Protesters and families of hostages rallied to demand a halt to the offensive due to the danger it may present for the lives of those in Hamas captivity, calling for a 'people's strike' (Gordon and Turgeman, 2025) and blocking major roads (The Jerusalem Post, 2025).

The methods of the protests have varied, ranging from setting up permanent encampments at the 'Hostages Square' in Tel Aviv, to peaceful demonstrations in public areas and homes of government officials, to strikes and more violent clashes with police forces. These efforts have been accompanied by vigorous campaigns by civil society groups in public fora and government hearings. While the effectiveness of the specific strategies is outside the purview of the present analysis, it is necessary to point out the diversity of means employed to pressure the government, their lack of a single organiser and their reliance not merely on opposition to the ruling coalition, but a core feature of Israeli state practice of safeguarding Jewish lives and retrieving hostages when necessary. Several civil society organisations have played a major part in organising the demonstrations, most prominently those formed by families and friends of the hostages, The Hostage and Missing Families Forum (*Maṭe HaMishpaḥot Lehahzeret HaḤatufim Vehanedarim*) and We Are All Hostages (*Kulanu Ḥatufim*). The distinctiveness of these organisations over various other anti-Netanyahu groups has been their consistent emphasis on the hostage issue, one capable of cutting across traditional party-political lines.

When considering the effects which domestic actors produce at Level II, the all-important of category of 'ratification' must be elaborated within the context of Israel. First and foremost, the present government is a coalition of parties who must agree to, or at least not veto, proposed government measures in the field of foreign policy. The coordination of interests between the ruling parties, while certainly an important factor of Level II, is assumed to take place regardless of public pressure to keep or modify certain policies. What both this coordination and future decision making hinges on, however, is the basic mechanism for maintaining political power in Israel, i.e. the winning of elections. Therefore,

the analysis of the protests' impact in articulating a hostage return deal as part of a win-set in future negotiations can be assessed in light of two sets of polling data: projected electoral support for the ruling coalition and public support for an immediate hostage deal.

Relying on data published by the newspaper Ma'ariv and conducted by Lazar Studies, since the break-out of the war, polling has consistently suggested the Netanyahu-led coalition would be left without a parliamentary majority in the event of an election (Cohen, 2023; M. Cohen, 2024; Cohen, 2025), with the most recent polling confirming by Madgav confirming this (Haaretz, 2025). Israel Democracy Institute's polls also show support for a hostage deal has been high since mid-2024, including ranking it as a higher priority than further military action against Hamas (Hermann et al. 2024a; 2024b; 2025a; 2025b). While these polls cannot prove an immediate causal link between the protests, they do point to a correlation between their aims and general public opinion, lending more weight to them being considered a major factor in analysing domestic politics.

Concluding remarks: results and limits of advocacy

An elaborate two-level analysis of Israel's policy during the October 7th War will need to reckon with other factors of Level I and Level II that have kept a comprehensive hostage deal from being agreed to. At Level I, this would include actual capacities to negotiate such a deal and the readiness of the other side to agree to it, while at Level II other priorities might figure equally or higher in the perceived win-set of decision makers, such as coalition stability, long-term strategic interests in further military action and potential benefits of achieving other goals that may out-weigh the hostage issue. A basic difficulty that has figured prominently in the Israeli war agenda has been the seeming inability to reconcile two of the stated war goals: the military defeat of Hamas and the return of hostages. Not only does a need to ensure the survival of hostages restrain military action, but it also provides a powerful strategic asset to Hamas decision makers, cognizant of the domestic value of this issue in Israel, in deterring their complete defeat.

The present analysis, however, indicates that any future ceasefire or peace agreement between Israel and Hamas in the on-going war will include provisions for the release of all Israeli hostages, due to its inclusion in the minimal win-set necessary for both domestic ratification and further political survival of the current government. In the immediate context of high public demand and unfavourable election predictions, as well as the long-term features of Israeli political life, any analyses of the intersections between Israeli foreign and domestic policy during the October 7th War cannot overlook the importance of the hostage return

protests, if not as a direct cause, then certainly an indicator of minimal ratification requirements of an eventual conflict-ending agreement.

Vratite ih sve kući: Protesti za povratak talaca i stvaranje izraelske spoljne politike u Sedmooktobarskom ratu

Sažetak



U članku je iznesena analiza uloge protesta usmerenih ka povratku izraelskih talaca kao ključnog faktora u postavljanju spoljnopolitičke agende Države Izrael tokom prve dve godine Sedmooktobarskog rata. Oslanjajući se na pristup „dva nivoa” Roberta Patnama u analizi spoljne politike, demonstranti, podjednako kao organizovane grupe i obični građani, se posmatraju kao ključni akteri na „drugom” nivou, tj. nivou unutrašnje politike. Pokazujući značaj protesta u postavljanju agende za vođenje rata i pregovore o miru, kao i njihova ograničenja, u članku se zagovara neprekidna analitička važnost narodnih mobilizacija u okviru izraelskog političkog sistema i spoljne politike. Naročito se sposobnost protesta da postave i održe povratak talaca kao ratni cilj uz nemogućnost da proizvedu dogovor o primirju stavlja u kontekst pluralizma i demokratskih procedura u Izraelu.

Ključne reči



izraelski taoci, Sedmooktobarski rat, narodna mobilizacija, spoljna politika Izraela, unutrašnja i spoljna politika

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